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ABSTRACT

The term "at-risk" has changed significantly in its usage and some of the insights offered by college students studying at-risk youth are presented in this paper. Their observations are grouped under what it means to be an at-risk youth; measurement techniques, such as the status or cohort method, which are used to identify such youth; the importance of viewing at-risk youth from an ecological perspective; the information which can be gleaned from viewing at-risk youth from a systems approach; the importance of social climate in understanding the behavior of at-risk youth; the ways in which organizational theory can help in conceptualizing student performance; and the need to determine whether or not an intervention should target the individual or the entire system. The review also explores school/human services collaboration, particularly the need for full-service schools in which all the child's needs are met. A brief outline of the role that documentary work may play in school/human services is also presented. (Contains 18 references.) (RJM)

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At Risk Youth: Theory, Practice, and Reform

A Dilemma

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It makes a professor feel really good when students take material that he or she has written and goes to a new level of understanding with this material. Such is the case with the following information which students derived from Chapter 1 of At Risk Youth: Theory, Practice and Reform (Kronick, 1997). The terms which students described in Human Services Methods II at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville during the fall of 1997, included (1) at risk youth, (2) event rate, (3) status rate, (4) cohort rate, (5) ecological system, (6) systems analysis, (7) intervention, (8) social climate, and (9) organization theory.

I would like to make some comments on each of these terms and then share some comments from the students. The reader is encouraged to look for some themes in the responses, as well as dissimilarities.

1. At risk youth - This term was first used to describe deaf and blind children. The emphasis was on physical disabilities. The importance of language. Does the term at risk put the child at a disadvantage from the very beginning? Higgs and Tarsi (1997) argue that the term at promise is more useful in describing these children today than at risk is. The term at risk today generally does not refer to deaf and blind children, but rather to those that are not likely to graduate from high school and have a high probability of being incarcerated in jails, prisons or psychiatric hospitals, or ending up homeless and/or on welfare.

2-4. The measurement of at risk youth may be done in three ways. These are the event, status or cohort method. Each method yields a rate. I tend to prefer the cohort rate because it yields a trend over a period of years rather than just measuring a point in time. The cohort rate adapted by the federal government generally yields a higher rate than the event or status methods. The reader is encouraged to learn which method was used when interpreting results.

The politics of at risk youth is clearly established when computing and determining drop out rates. I encourage a contextual analysis when interpreting drop out figures. Whose ox is getting gored is of great importance here!

5. A human service perspective demands an ecological view of the problem. At risk youth are seen as people with problems rather than problem people. Seeing the individual as a total person is of critical importance. Students have problems in school for both curricular and noncurricular reasons. To focus on one at the exclusion of the other means failure.

Curricular problems arise from the Lock-Step curriculum. The Lock-Step curriculum guarantees only one thing ... failure. Students are never all at the same point in their development. Thus individualizing instruction is the answer to this dilemma. Entering first grade, students read at various levels, probably ranging from 0.5 to 1.9. By the time this class becomes high school seniors the range in reading scores has increased. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer (Kronick & Hargis, 1990).

Noncurricular causes of at risk status include: divorce, abuse, alcoholism, poverty, crime, and many others. The school in conjunction with human services must collaborate with the child and his or her family to solve these problems. An ecological concern for the total person is a must.

6. It is all too easy to list a batch of characteristics that typify at risk students. It is much more useful, however, to look at the interaction between the student and the school to find viable answers for understanding at risk status and initiating interventions to help solve the problems.

A systems approach is very useful in this situation. A systems approach emphasizes the role of the student, as well as the school in the student's failure to thrive. Systems analysis alerts

us to the fact that when one part of the system changes, all other parts will change (visualize a mobile here). This approach also moves away from victim blaming and to looking for major causes. (Remember going after who is throwing the bodies into the river as opposed to pulling the bodies out.)

A systems approach raises political problems because it calls the system into accountability. Politically it is much simpler to separate at risk, attach a significant behavior or characteristic to them, and aver that this is what makes them the way they are.

In taking a systems approach, the most difficult task for the worker and the teacher is to determine where to enter the system.

What we know is this:

1) People never have one problem, they have many problems.

2) There is not just one cause for these problems, there are many.

3) The presenting problem may not be the real problem.

7. Social climate is a construct that offers a great deal for understanding the behavior of at risk youth. Research by Moos (1970) and Kronick (1972) revealed that school and class room climate could be created to increase student learning. Of the variables extant in the Moos social climate scale, one that continues to have strong explanatory power is order. Students report learning better in a classroom that has order. It is the teacher who establishes and maintains this order. Current research also reveals that classroom order is a powerful variable in determining classroom success, especially for those who are at risk for academic failure.

Social climate as constructed by Moos (1970) has the following subscales: autonomy, spontaneity, support, affiliation, involvement, clarity, order, and submission. Moos found that the

larger the patient staff ratio in a psychiatric hospital the greater emphasis placed on submission and the less emphasis that was placed on the positive variables. Kronick (1972) found much the same as Moos when applying the Moos scale to a classroom setting.

James Coleman (1966) found that social climate had a greater influence on non-white students than on white students. He used the term minority student. It would be very interesting to see that as the white student becomes the minority child if he or she becomes more sensitive to the effects of social climate. This will lead to a new area of re-search. The question will thus become which is of greater importance race or minority status?

Research prior to Moos (1970) found that when students perceived a social climate as open that is where the individual has freedom and flexibility, higher grades are earned than when the climate is perceived as closed where the opposite is true. Kronick (1972) found the same results. My work was designed to see if perception of social climate as open would lead to high grades for students. At that time, 1972, these characteristics that would have them labeled at risk included being male, black, having a low IQ and coming from a low socioeconomic background. What the data revealed albeit the cells were small, was that male, black, low IQ, low SES students who perceived the classroom social climate as open made higher grades than females who were white with high IQ and came from a high socioeconomic background.

School climate is a concept that has a great deal of usefulness in attempting to increase academic performance. This holds true for students of all capabilities. It is possible that school climate is a force that could answer the question: excellence and/or equity. Is it in fact impossible to have both?

8. Organizational theory is often neglected in studying student performance. In studying

the school as well as the student, organizational theory is a fertile school of thought. The work of Bolman and Deal (1997) is found to be quite valuable by students. Their work targets four frames of organizational life and behavior. The most important one is the one you forget. The four frames are: structural, human resource, political and symbolic. The structural frame is influenced by sociology. Weber's (1947) writings on bureaucracy are the central force in this frame. His writings were aimed at the evils of nepotism. By creating a structure run on a division of labor, the structure then replaced the inefficient familial network as he saw it.

The human resource frame is influenced by social psychology. It was a swing back to familialism, in that management became a style of working with the person. It focused on person as opposed to task management, if that is possible. This approach read theory X and theory Y and saw workers as capable and interested in their work (McGregor, 1960).

The political frame as its name implies is influenced by political science. The politics of organizations become one of conflict when resources are scarce. When are resources not scarce in the human services business? The game of politics is discussed in detail in chapter 2 of At-Risk Youth: Theory, Practice and Reform. A key point of this chapter is the role and scope of the relative influence of elites and pluralists in decision making. Charter schools and other alternative school management styles are influenced by this.

The symbolic frame influenced by philosophy makes sense out of nonsense. This frame relies on ceremonies and rites of passage. The symbolic frame is used by management to both explain and justify organizational behavior.

9. Through all of this we must make interventions to prevent, improve, or extinguish behaviors. Interventions may be macro or micro. They may aim at the individual or the system.

Some interventions may actually aim at both

Interventions in human service work including education and schools are very tricky. Goals are sometimes difficult to set. Do we want better grades, increased school and family interaction, better behavior, etc.? Once the goals have been set the measurement of each variable must be determined. The means to these goals must also be determined. Often times too much emphasis is spent on one at the expense of the other. Interventions must also be evaluated. Results that are determined in a process or summative manner allow changes to be made while the interventions are being done. Outcome evaluations are done to see how well the intervention worked.

Assessment and evaluation are extremely important in human service work. Appropriately determining what the client or clients needs is critical. Finding out how well we are doing is of equal importance.

The politics involved in assessment and evaluation go without saying. Honest and forthright evaluation is critical to human service delivery. It makes no sense to deliver services just because this is the way we have always done it. Objective evaluation facilitates efficient and effective human service delivery.

When budget cuts come, don't allow them to be in the evaluation area because there is so much emphasis on direct service. Too often the assumption is made that assessment and evaluation will tell us what we already know. It doesn't have to be this way. If it is, the argument is that the money spent would have been better spent in providing direct service. Obviously, no argument can be made with this.

School Human Service Collaboration:

Or the School as a Human Service Agency

There is no question that issues of multiculturalism are played out in the arena of the school. At the same time, so are the noncurricular reasons for student failure. Hence the school is the central focus for many of society's ills. Thus the school must be a collaborator and team player in providing needed services to communities, schools and families.

Often neglected by the academy and not practiced sufficiently in the field is teamwork. Teamwork is a necessary skill now more than ever because of managed care. By using a continuum of care and a least restrictive model of helping, school human service collaboration becomes a must.

It is certain that we have the knowledge and skills to do school and human service collaboration. Where we may be lacking is in the resolve. Our attitudes have not been directed in such a way as to promote a needed collaboration between schools and human services.

There are, of course, notable exceptions to this lack of collaboration, including programs driven by the work of Levin (1988), Comer (1993), Slavin (1991), Fine (1994) and Dryfoos (1990). But these programs are the exceptions rather than the rule. It must become that the prevailing ethos will be that school human service collaboration is the rule rather than the exception.

What happens when the family is so damaging to children that it no longer makes sense to work with it. In these very specific cases, the school must become the child's parent. What exactly does this mean? It means the family is so toxic to the child, the child must be removed

and other arrangements made. These arrangements would need to include all facets of the child's needs, which include food, shelter and clothing. The school could most certainly provide these in tandem with human service agencies.

Dryfoos's (1990) concept of the full service school comes to mind here. Why not provide three meals a day? Breakfast and lunch are already provided by many schools. Through an extended day program, dinner could be provided also. Clothing drives could insure that a full closet existed at every school. A plus for those who donated would be that they could see the immediate results of their largesse.

Shelter is a bit more difficult. But why not put cots in the gym and provide a safe haven for those who truly need it?

Dryfoos (1990) has written extensively on the full service school. Her linchpin, if you will, is the school nurse. This is certainly not a bad place to begin. By meeting the basic health needs of the child, the lower level or safety needs are being addressed first (Maslow, 1970).

It would appear obvious that these basic needs must be met before the child can even begin to try to learn. This is true at all levels of education. It is especially important during the child's formative years. Recent findings from biology on the role of neurons, synapses, and axons, reveal the indelible marks left during the first ten years of development. These findings claim that events during the child's formative years do not disappear. What could make the school as a human service agency more cogent than this?

Findings by Kronick (1997) show that the at risk population is not diminishing. That we have the methods, skills and knowledge to do the job is clear. That prevention for crime, mental illness, and poverty is achieved through working in schools is clear cut. In other words, working

with at risk youth at an early point in time such as kindergarten or preschool, should pay long range dividends as prevention for mental health, corrections, and welfare.

The fear of a self-fulfilling prophecy has prevented many academics, researchers and practitioners from instituting early prevention programs. The lack of immediate results has often times kept policy makers and politicians from supporting and instituting early prevention programs.

It is now past time to move beyond these roadblocks and institute prevention programs, give them sufficient time to see if they work, and evaluate them objectively and fairly.

School -Human Services - Documentary Work

After reading Robert Coles (1997) Doing Documentary Work, I wonder if this wouldn't be an excellent motif for evaluating the type of collaborative program that would be involved between schools and human services. The documentary style allows for longitudinal process study of the program. Interviewing participants, filming programs, and utilizing photographs will give a rich picture of what and how well the program is doing. What the program is doing may seem circular. However, oftentimes what is intended and what is delivered are miles apart when it comes to program development and program delivery.

The documentary style may use the written motif of Agee (1959), Williams (19__), and Coles (1997) the film of Wiseman (1967), or the intense photography of Evans (1939).

By doing this type of work we get down to the actual, the real. Documentary work also requires that we present the material in such a way that the layman will understand it. Documentary work is not done in a style that benefits our colleagues solely, but rather it is done so that all may understand and learn from it. This style fits naturally with trying to understand at

risk youth and problem solve in such a way that these situations will be worked out

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